



REPORT  
CAREY HARRISON

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Recent activity 2016/17: July 2017 *Clear to Kill*, a novel, published by Dr. Cicero Books, UK; June 2017 Keynote Speech, “Walking to Auschwitz”, at the Einstein Forum’s annual 3-day conference (on “Imagine Solidarity”) in Potsdam. Subsequently elected to the Board of the Einstein Forum; June 2017 “Politics and Fiction”, talk given to the Fellows of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. 2017 also includes: *Hitler and the Wolf-Child*, screenplay for Borsig Films, Berlin; *The Heart Beneath*, novel quartet published in a single omnibus edition by Odyssey Press, UK, as well as separately by Endeavour Books, UK; *Where Every Stranger (is a ghost)*, a novel quintet commissioned by Dr. Cicero Books, US, work in progress; *Emily’s Penis*, a novel, work in progress; five public readings from my novel, *How to Push Through*, at the Geschichten in Jurten literary festival, Berlin, and at the Z-Bar Literary Salon, Berlin. 2016 includes: *How to Push Through*, a novel, published by Dr. Cicero Books, US, and by Endeavour Books, UK; *The Heart Beneath*, novel quartet published by Dr. Cicero Books, US; “A Writing Life”, talk given to the Fellows of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. – Address: Brooklyn College, City University of New York, 2900 Bedford Avenue, New York, NY 11210, USA. E-mail: ranald.carew@gmail.com.

I owe the astonishing good fortune of my ten-months’ Fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin to a variety of fortuitous circumstances and a number of individuals including Stephen Greenblatt, the eminent literary critic and historian and former Permanent Fellow at the Wiko, as well as to the generous goodwill extended by the Wiko itself – whose Rector, Luca Giuliani, cited my work and gave it a new, burnished gloss. My academic output is modest – which is to say that although I have held down professorships at

many universities in the UK and America, including the Universities of California and Texas and the City University of New York, as well as Cornell and the Florida Institute of Technology, and Essex University in my native Britain, I have contributed little in the way of academic writing: a few talks but no books, no articles – or none that deserve to be remembered. My output has been extensive in the realms of fiction, but this still leaves me feeling among true scholars much as W. H. Auden said he did when he found himself among scientists – “like a shabby curate who has strayed by mistake into a roomful of Dukes”. Hence my especial gratefulness to the Rector and the Board for including me in this year’s collection of scholarly Dukes.

Such a gathering might have been rather haughty and exclusive – I, who had known geniuses but never been in such a handpicked gathering of high flyers, would not have begrudged them their sense of exclusivity. In the event it was quite the opposite. I have never encountered all at once so many brilliant people who were as open and as warm and welcoming as the Fellows amongst whom I found myself at the Wiko. Some of this openness can perhaps be attributed to the very concept of the Wiko, bringing together the finest minds in different fields, gifted people who had no reason to be defensive about their talents, or guarded about their field of study, since none of us – or very few, hardly any – were in any sense rivals. What I’m accustomed to from the professoriate, and I’m sure I’m not alone in this, has been the inherent dividedness of academic life, with battle lines drawn between its own members. All the departments (ranging from English to Comparative Literature to Psychology) of which I have been a member have been alike in this. University faculties, even under the most benevolent of chairpersons, form themselves into factions along many different lines, chiefly political, but also by age, by race, by gender, by pedagogic style. No matter how or why, division there will be – and rivalry, inevitably, along with the compensatory solace of sharing a faction and a stance in relation to department politics. The Wiko, by definition, circumvents this trench warfare. The variety of different fields, the absence of a teaching requirement which would soon separate us along pedagogical lines, and the relative brevity of our presence at the Wiko, all function to mitigate the very things that make academic life fractious and to replace them with an unthreatened sense of achievement, each individual proud to have been chosen and taking pleasure in his or her own field, and with a willingness to share ideas and information. Every encounter I had with the many scientists present in my Wiko year was a welcome eye-opener. I learnt more during my time in Berlin than I ever learnt during my science-starved schooldays.

To be so luxuriously accommodated – in terms of our apartment, which hosted my wife and youngest daughter as well as me – and to be so well fed, in such comfortable surroundings, has been no less extraordinary. We swiftly got used to the splendours of the main building, but awed visitors never ceased to remind us how fortunate we were. And this was without visiting other parts of the Wiko campus. I rejected the offer of an office, having always worked by preference “on the hoof”, in restaurants, in buses, on park benches; rarely in offices; almost never in libraries. But the main building’s Fellows’ Library, with the doors left open, restored to me the sense of bustle, of coming and going, even of welcome interruptions, that accompany my favoured working spaces. In time I became such a fixture there – the Rector even told me that seeing me at my post, as he descended the main stairs, gave him a sense that all was well – that others joined me, and by the end we were usually two or even three, working at the same table. This was comfortable and – for me – soothing. I understand why most, though not all, of the other Fellows, jumped at the chance of a well-appointed office in the new, adjacent building, but even the word “office” strikes claustrophobia into my soul.

I share with all the Fellows of our year, and surely of past years too, a sense of the great privilege of our access to a superb library staff in the Weiße Villa, where Sonja Grund helped me in my researches with exceptional kindness and diligence. These were not academic or even fiction-related researches, but rather research in an area in which my ten months in Berlin have supplied information more life-changing than any book or article. Many of my family perished in the Holocaust; with one exception it was from Berlin that they were deported to their death in the camps. The exception was a great-aunt who had married in Landshut and, when the SS came to fetch her, jumped to her death from her bedroom window. She too had been raised in Berlin, and in her death I add her name to the 7,000 Berliners estimated to have taken their own lives rather than be deported to the death camps. I had been in Berlin often, but facts and figures such as these were unknown to me. Unknown too, were the details of my family members’ murder.

I first came to Berlin as a child, with my grandmother, to visit my grandfather’s grave in Weißensee. We did this more than once; East Berlin is a clear, familiar memory. My far-sighted grandfather, the chief surgeon at the Israelitisches Krankenhaus on Elsässer Straße, which is now Torstraße, sent his wife and three daughters out of Germany in 1933. He died of a heart attack in ’34 and was spared a worse fate. His own father was still alive, and died only in ’39, at 91, after being nursed in his old age by one of his daughters, my great-aunt Selma, who thereby forfeited her escape. Her husband had died in the

First World War (during which my grandfather won the Iron Cross); her sons escaped to Israel; but for her it was too late, in '39; she was trapped and sent to suffer an appalling death in Lithuania, at the infamous Ninth Fort in Kaunas. Among the pilgrimages this Wiko-year has enabled me to perform has been to visit Kaunas, in her memory. It also enabled me to visit yet again my grandfather's grave, in Berlin, and to track down my great-grandparents' grave, also in Weißensee, to which my grandmother never took me.

I doubt if she knew exactly where it was. When the war ended she and her daughters discovered which of their cousins, aunts, uncles and in-laws had simply vanished. But they had no idea where and when they had died. I had returned to Berlin, briefly, on numerous occasions over the past 50 years, usually as a result of radio plays of mine translated and broadcast by Deutschlandradio, and now and again for a talk. (One of these talks was at the Einstein Forum, where this June I was fortunate to be able to return, thanks to my Wiko-year, and give another talk and wind up with a new and lasting relationship to this Institute as a Board Member.) Now, with time and Sonja Grund's help, and that of *Stolpersteine* activists, I was able to trace in gruesome yet grounding detail the fate of my relatives; the story of their attempts to evade the dragnet; the day of their enforced departure, be it for Auschwitz, Belsen, Buchenwald or Theresienstadt, and the day (often the precise date) of their death. I had been to these camps, but all the piety in the world lacks the sense of completion, of connection, that knowledge has provided.

I have photocopies detailing my relatives' last accounting – doggedly preserved by the authorities – of property and possessions; on these documents, my relatives' handwriting. We have four commemorative *Stolpersteine* on Viktoria-Luise-Platz. I have been able to clean these, with my daughter. And thanks to my year at the Wiko, she has made herself a home in the new Berlin. Literally so: she has an apartment and a place at Humboldt University to do her Master's degree. Not least of the extraordinary things the Wiko has brought me – which the Wiko could not have foreseen, and neither could I – is the re-establishing of this family continuity: my mother was raised in Charlottenburg, where my daughter now lives, close by, and where in '45 my 24-year-old cousin Lotte Alice hid until found, or betrayed, and dispatched to Auschwitz. My daughter too is 24. Her presence in Berlin, for at least the next two years, is a *mitzvah*, a blessing not to be captured in words. To be here has been gruelling as well as wonderful; I'm not sure if, had my daughter not decided to stay and study in Berlin, I would have returned as easily as I came, last September. So many frightened, bitter ghosts are now so real for me, on so many streets. But

happily I *will* come, since the Einstein Forum beckons annually, and I will be able to return to the Wiko and greet its wonderful staff once more.

They are the ones to whom this brief account should be dedicated. (I haven't spoken of the novels I've worked on – or which, more exactly, have been working on me; if they could speak they might have something to tell you; my part in it is simply to be spoken through, an empty – as empty as possible – but grateful bullhorn. I would be lying if I claimed I had anything to tell. It is for others to decipher what my work has to tell.) When I arrived I immediately asked to be allowed to give the opening talk, hoping to help create an initial mood that contained something of the gratefulness and delight I felt, at being here; I didn't yet know how much this mood was already guaranteed by Thorsten, by Daniel (especially Daniel, a spirit of unstinting encouragement in my affairs) and by the Rector, whose unfailing presence and whose wit and gentle humour set the tone for the year. Then, along with them and with Sonja, comes the wonderful assistance provided by Anja and Stefan in the library, by Andrea (how unfailingly helpful she has been!), Vera and Sophia, and the unflappable and supremely helpful ladies of the Empfang. I look forward so much to seeing them all again. Stefan Schlak too, whose sparks of wit and brilliance I need to sit before, annually; Stefan who pointed me at another pilgrimage belatedly made – to Marbach, where amid the voluminous archive, I was able to extract the manuscript of the novel I most revere, Sebald's *Austerlitz*, and sit with it, paying reverence. Finally, most wondrous of all the Wiko's gifts to us: Dunia. Dunia, and the ladies of the kitchen – their kindness has topped everything. Dunia was already a mother to us all, watchful for everyone's dietary needs and preferences (I can't say my real mother ever watched so carefully); when I turned vegan – to universal disbelief – she simply created vegan food for me *every day*. This my mother would never have done.

If I were to begin to talk about the relationships I have forged among my fellow Fellows, there would be no end to this account. I have never made so many good friends so fast, not even in happiest schooldays. And this I owe not only to the good fortune of a Wiko year perhaps wonderfully attuned by sheer chance to what I might seek in a friend, but to the founding idea of the Wiko: almost a home for the manufacture of friendship. A species of university in heaven. Except that the 10-month term, the brevity, is a key factor that no university could accommodate. And except that, also – I miss my teaching! Which allows me the final luxury: that I can go home eagerly, despite leaving such a wonderful experience behind. Thank you, Wiko, your staff and your founders! I might have hoped, in ignorance, for an experience half as profound and half as memorable; but in truth I

couldn't have come anywhere near anticipating the richness of a year as a Wiko Fellow. Not only I but also my daughter benefited, perhaps decisively for the rest of her life; my wife, as everyone knows who saw her exhibition at the Wiko, was inspired by our stay to produce wonderful art. I envy those for whom this prize, a Wiko year, lies in the future. Once more, thank you, Wiko – on behalf of my family no less than myself.